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Chair

Mr. Robert Oliphant

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)): I'm going to call this meeting to order, which is our 123rd meeting in the 42nd Parliament.

Pursuant to Standing Orders 110 and 111, we are considering the order in council appointment of Richard Wex to the position of chairperson of the Immigration and Refugee Board. It was referred to our committee on September 21 for consideration.

We thank Mr. Wex for attending the meeting today. He is given a chance to make an opening statement, and then we will consider this appointment for the first hour in committee.

Welcome, Mr. Wex, and thank you for agreeing to come.

Mr. Richard Wex (Chairperson, Immigration and Refugee Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, I am pleased to be here with you this afternoon to talk about my appointment as chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board, the IRB.

As I have told my new team from the start, I am truly proud to have been named chairperson of the IRB, especially at this time.

[*English*]

I joined the public service over 25 years ago in part because I was socialized by my family about the importance of public service and the opportunity public servants have to contribute to Canada and to Canadians. I can think of few public policy issues that are currently more pressing or of greater importance than our country's response to global migration.

The IRB, as the independent administrative tribunal entrusted by Parliament with resolving immigration and refugee cases fairly and efficiently, plays a key role in Canada's approach to the challenges and opportunities presented by such migration.

It's part of a broader ecosystem of departments and agencies that influences the public's overall confidence in Canada's approach to our asylum determination system and immigration more broadly. In short, it is clear, as I believe the members of this committee know very well, that the IRB matters to one of the most important public policy issues of our day.

The IRB enjoys a global reputation in terms of its model for refugee determination and is known for having a dedicated, highly skilled and professional workforce, a workforce that frequently carries a heavy responsibility, a heavy workload, and often adjudicates or assists in the adjudication of the most complex and at times the most sensitive of cases one can be asked to decide.

Many of the decisions that IRB members take on a daily basis affect the lives and/or the safety of the people appearing before them, some of whom have experienced unimaginable pain and suffering. Decisions often have life-altering consequences, and there are important program integrity considerations to be carefully weighed. Few organizations have responsibilities that so directly touch the lives, the liberty or the well-being of those who come before them. It's an institution, committee members, with a very serious mandate.

[*Translation*]

Leading an organization that is so important to the smooth operation of our asylum granting system, which has a considerable impact on public trust in our immigration system as a whole and has a direct influence on people's daily lives is a privilege and, frankly, a heavy responsibility. That is why I am so proud of my appointment.

I would like to say a few words about my professional background.

[*English*]

After graduating from law school, I chose to join the Department of Justice to work on social issues and began my career practising aboriginal law. At the time, it was a relatively new area of practice providing incredible opportunities for young counsel like myself.

Over the course of the next seven years, I served as lead counsel on the Indian residential schools file; various complex land and self-government negotiation claims, including the sensitive and politically charged Ipperwash land claim; and regularly appeared before federal commissions of inquiry to address historical claims. It was very meaningful work and, frankly, I loved it. From there I took on senior leadership positions in four other large departments.

I understand you have a copy of my biography so in the interest of time, I will only make two points.

Over the last 25 years, I have successfully taken on increasing levels of executive responsibility in legal, policy and operational roles across a range of social, economic, environmental, security and immigration portfolios. I have served in senior executive positions with the departments of Fisheries and Oceans, Public Safety, the Canada Border Services Agency, and most recently as the associate deputy minister at the Department of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada. I don't want to take up more time about the results that my team and I were able to achieve in these positions, but I do hope in the hour we have ahead of us that perhaps there will be an opportunity to discuss some of those.

I believe that my experience in leading organizations, coupled with my background in law, as well as my knowledge of the immigration and border security portfolios provide me with the necessary skill set to help manage the challenges currently facing our asylum system and to effectively manage the IRB more broadly going forward. The IRB, and particularly the refugee determination system, is currently under strain, in part because of events beyond our borders, resulting in an unprecedented increase in the volume of cases. As a result, and building on the work that has already begun, it will be important for the IRB to identify innovative practices and advance a disciplined and results-oriented agenda.

[*Translation*]

I took on my new role roughly two months ago. I intend to meet the staff and stakeholders in the coming weeks to get a better overview, but I would like to share three initial priorities.

[*English*]

First, capacity issues clearly need to be addressed. We're working on options for government consideration of how best to address both the existing backlog and growth in intake going forward. This work is now under way and will be a priority for us over the coming months.

Second, I am working with the IRB deputy chairs and the broader leadership team to identify strategies that can better support our adjudicators and help accelerate decision-making while maintaining fairness and quality. Good work has already been done and progress is being made, but more will be required.

Third, there are opportunities for improved systems-wide management. This will involve strengthening collaboration with both IRCC and CBSA to identify operational inefficiencies across the system, and to collectively address them. In addition to systems-wide improvements to the asylum system, areas of concern in our immigration division have also been identified, and these too form part of our early set of management priorities.

● (1540)

[*Translation*]

As I said at the beginning of my speech, Mr. Chair, I am proud and pleased to assume this new role. I was and remain impressed by the degree of commitment and talent of the IRB staff, as well as the very difficult work that IRB members and their support staff are tasked with.

I am committed to working with this committee to contribute to the success of the IRB and I believe that working on the areas that I just talked about is a good start.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, I want to thank you for inviting me to appear here today, for the first time in my capacity as chairperson of the IRB. I look forward to a productive relationship with the committee over the years to come. I will be pleased to answer any questions that members may have for me.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll begin our questioning with Ms. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Wex, for coming today. Congratulations on your recent appointment. We look forward to working with you.

You have been in a senior executive leadership role for the operation Syrian refugees program, a national project that welcomed over 25,000 Syrian refugees. A lot of different approaches were taken in that program. What have you learned from that and what how can you implement that? You mentioned that one of your priorities is creating operational efficiencies. What have you learned from that program that you think will help you to increase the efficiency at the IRB?

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for the member's question.

I had mentioned three things. First of all, I was privileged to be part of that when I first started at IRCC. The week I started was two weeks after the body of Alan Kurdi washed up on the beach in Turkey, having drowned in the Mediterranean. It was a very difficult time and there were a lot of issues being discussed about how best Canada could contribute to the humanitarian crisis that was taking place. I was there from the get-go in terms of how this started and in terms of the Syrian operation.

I'll share three things. First, government, with the support of civic society, can do tremendous things when there is the political will to do it. We saw that with this initiative.

Second is communications. We, and the minister of the day, the government of the day and members of this committee, had access to information and we were able to be very transparent with how things were going—the good, the bad and the ugly. I think that generated the confidence of the public in terms of what we were doing and how we were going about doing it. I think that was a very important lesson learned. We were publishing stats daily, and we were talking about the challenges we were facing, about capacity issues, and about integration issues. I think it's important to learn that communication and being open and transparent is necessary to generate the confidence of Canadians.

Third is the importance of managing relationships with stakeholders. It's quite interesting. This operation would not have succeeded without the support of civic society, but also not without the support of key stakeholders such as the International Organization for Migration and the UNHCR, and of course all the settlement and integration groups throughout the country. The point I'm making is that at a time of need, we need the IOM and the UNHCR to be helpful to us. Having those relationships developed in advance. and maintaining those relationships even when we don't necessarily need to, is an important lesson learned.

Applied to the IRB, I would simply say that we're facing significant challenges right now. If and when there is the will, I believe the conditions for success will materialize and we can get things done.

Also, I intend to work very closely with stakeholders to help inform the way forward. They are often the canaries in the coal mine. Sometimes they know of things before the organization does. I intend, as I have in the past, to maintain strong relationships with our stakeholders to better inform our go-forward agenda.

● (1545)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: While working at IRCC and while you were working with CBSA, you had the opportunity to work with the IRB. How do you think these three organizations can interact with each other? What lessons have you learned while working with the IRB will you be implementing now at the IRB?

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, I do believe, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, that my experience at IRCC and the Canada Border Services Agency will help me position the IRB for success, with my leadership team and staff.

I say that because, in particular, but not exclusively, the asylum determination system is very complex. We all have vertical accountabilities, but it's a continuum and it's quite horizontal. Without getting into too many details, the reality is that from intake to first-level decision-making, to recourse, to pre-removal and removal, there are a lot of hand-offs between CBSA, IRCC, IRB and then back to IRCC and then over to CBSA. That's exactly how it works.

The experience of having worked in those other organizations gives me a broader perspective. It does us no good if the IRB is able to secure funds and move down a backlog if, at the end of the day, either IRCC or CBSA isn't also well positioned for success, because the asylum determination system is informed by all three federal players. I believe that my relationships and my understanding of their operational contexts will help position me and the board to be able to work more effectively with those organizations in the context of the broader management of the system, while not doing anything to undermine the independence of the IRB in the context of discharging our adjudicative responsibilities.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: No, that's fine.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you.

Good luck. What a big, important job.

My questions relate to your planned approach to current challenges that are facing the IRB.

I'll start by trying to set the context. Can you give us a sense of the current inventory of cases at the IRB?

Mr. Richard Wex: Yes, I can. It's currently at about 65,000 cases at the RPD, the refugee protection division.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If there were no more cases, let's say none for the rest of the year, that it just stopped, how long do you anticipate it would take to clear that inventory?

Mr. Richard Wex: We're processing approximately 30,000 claims a year, so two years.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Great.

Obviously, we're seeing an increased volume of inventory coming into the IRB, and year over year we have seen an increase. If the current volumes that we're seeing continue at the rate that they are, given current resourcing, do you project that backlog growing or decreasing?

Mr. Richard Wex: The backlog will be growing, because the intake is currently greater than our capacity.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

You've identified this challenge, and frankly, I think it is one of the biggest challenges that we have in Canada right now.

I have a few questions on your approach.

Have you gone to the government yet with any recommendations on how to reduce that backlog? What were they? Maybe you can give us a sense of your approach both on how to decrease the intake and how to deal with the backlog of the current inventory.

Mr. Richard Wex: I have not yet provided any recommendations to the government. I hope to be briefing the minister shortly.

I can say that you have diagnosed it correctly. The capacity is smaller than the intake at the moment, which means the backlog will grow going forward. That said, the good news is that, with monies received through budget 2018, the backlog in terms of what it otherwise would have been is less, to the tune of about 20,000 over the next two years. The backlog is still growing, but it's growing at a slower pace than it otherwise would have without budget 2018 money.

● (1550)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of assumptions on that, what assumption are you using in terms of the intake numbers, for that model?

Mr. Richard Wex: Going forward?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes.

Mr. Richard Wex: Well, if you look at last year's numbers, we received about 55,000 claims over the course of the year.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So, you're using about 55,000.

Mr. Richard Wex: I'm just going on what last year's projection was.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If it were more than that, then that delta would grow.

Mr. Richard Wex: Of course.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

When do you plan on briefing the minister with regard to your potential solutions for this?

Mr. Richard Wex: We're working through options right now with the team. We're looking at a number of things, and I'm happy to try to explain the approach that we're adopting.

As I'm sure members of this committee understand, it's not as simple as saying, "Look, there's a backlog of some 60,000. Therefore how many people would it take to get rid of 60,000?"

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Mr. Richard Wex: We're working through various options right now, where we're looking at—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Going back though, in terms of timeline, when do you plan on presenting that to the government?

Mr. Richard Wex: As I indicated in my opening remarks, over the course of the next couple of months we are putting a proposal together, working with the department. We'll be in a position to brief the minister, I imagine, over the next few months.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Great.

Would you be willing to table with the committee an appropriately classified document that outlines your approaches to that particular.... I think it's important for parliamentarians to understand that. The government, I would imagine, would be discussing this in terms of the federal budget.

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, no, I wouldn't be comfortable....

Mr. Matt DeCourcey (Fredericton, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I respect my colleague's need to question the witness, but we are here to discuss his qualifications and competencies as they relate to his ability to perform the duty.

I respect that there's latitude given to members here at the committee about the overall vision of Mr. Wex at the IRB, but I would suggest that it stay within the confines of questioning about the capacity and performance competencies of the chair.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, in response to that, this is like a job interview, right? If there is a problem that is being presented in a job interview, one would want to know the candidate's understanding of the scope of the problem and potential approaches to dealing with the problem, in order to evaluate whether this person has the competency to meet that.

I would say that this is very much in scope. Given the severity in terms of the importance of immigration policy that Mr. Wex has to deal with, I think it is in scope. I don't see how it wouldn't be.

The Chair: I would agree that your explanation is in scope, but I think requesting the tabling of a document that we don't know exists or we don't know what it is, would not be in scope. It is very fair to ask the witness what his vision is, but I don't think it would be within scope to ask him to table a document that doesn't yet exist.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of a question on that, why wouldn't we, as parliamentarians, want to know what this person's plan is for dealing with a 65,000-case inventory? I'd just like to hear your rationale for that.

The Chair: It's not my rationale.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Well, it is.

The Chair: The reality is that we have a witness here. You've asked a question, and I think it's very fair to ask him his plans. That is very fair—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You just contradicted yourself, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: —but not to ask him to table a document that doesn't exist yet.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With respect, you just contradicted yourself, because you just said it was appropriate to ask for his plan. I asked for his plan, and then you said he shouldn't table his plan.

Can you just explain to the committee why you feel—

The Chair: I think it is very appropriate to ask for his plan.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So, I asked for it.

The Chair: That is a normal thing, but to ask him to table a document, I think, is outside our scope, because we don't know if that document exists. We don't know the confidentiality of that document.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So....

The Chair: You can ask anyway, but he doesn't need to give it to us.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To be fair, Mr. Chair....

Then, I move, Mr. Chair, that Mr. Wex table his plan, per your words—I'll use your words—his plan to address the 65,000-case inventory processing with this committee.

The Chair: We have a motion on the floor. I just want to consult with the clerk for a moment.

There is a motion on the floor. It is an admissible motion. Is there any discussion?

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): I would just say that I think the witness has already made it clear that he would be tabling it to cabinet and to the minister. Asking somebody to table bureaucratic instructions that are going to be used by cabinet before they make a decision, I think, is inappropriate.

● (1555)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to be clear on this, I'm not asking Mr. Wex to table any sort of cabinet direction. I think at this point in time, if the IRB doesn't have a plan to address the inventory and can't table that to Parliament, that's probably very problematic. I would ask Mr. Wex to clarify if there is a plan to address that.

Just to my colleagues, as parliamentarians here, we should be asking Mr. DeCourcey whether or not the government has a plan to address this. The government keeps talking about resourcing.

Mr. Chair, I'll point out, too, that there was a Globe and Mail article about two weeks ago where the minister who is now in charge of this file said that the IRB inventory would be reduced, but then the IRB contradicted the minister and said it wouldn't.

I think in terms of addressing Mr. Wex's competency in filling a very serious role, I would like to know what his plan is. I would like to also evaluate that in terms of why the minister would contradict Mr. Wex's own department. I wouldn't think that information would be cabinet confidence. I think that it's basic operation of government that his staff at the IRB would have, and I would like to evaluate that as a parliamentarian.

The Chair: Unfortunately, Mr. Wex isn't able to answer on a debate on the motion.

Mr. DeCourcey, and then Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: Mr. Chair, I can understand why my colleague would want that, but I would remind her, through you, Mr. Chair, that we're here pursuant to Standing Orders 110 and 111. If we look at paragraph (2) of Standing Order 111, it reads:

> The committee, if it should call an appointee or nominee to appear pursuant to section (1) of this Standing Order, shall examine the qualifications and competence of the appointee or nominee to perform the duties of the post to which he or she has been appointed or nominated.

I would agree that there should be latitude for the witness to talk about overall vision, but we are not here to discuss the particulars of what the chair of the IRB will be doing. That would be pursuant to a whole other request to have that witness come before this committee, and that's what I was alluding to when I first intervened.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Chair, on that question, and with all due respect to the parliamentary secretary, I think we heard from Mr. Wex in his presentation that he was about to outline some of the options they were entertaining. I don't know why we always do this. We get into this situation where we bicker about nothing, and then we get no information at all that is important to the job we are trying to do here. Maybe we can get on with it.

I will support, of course, the request for tabling of information. I always think the sharing of information amongst all parliamentarians is useful and helpful in finding solutions in a difficult situation. What we don't want to see is the misinformation that is being spread about the asylum seekers. I don't think it's good at all for Canada, or for anybody.

The IRB has an important role to play. There is no question about that. We rely on them to do this work diligently. They deserve to have the necessary resources. They have a report before them, the Yeates report, with many recommendations. I would love to hear from Mr. Wex about what the plan is, going forward, what he's thinking as a new sheriff in town at the IRB, and how we can move forward to deal with the challenges ahead of us.

May we please get on with it? I will support the motion tabled by my colleague, Ms. Rempel, but I would really just urge all members to step down from their podium and see if we can find a way forward to look at the issues in a way that is useful and helpful for everyone.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, I would like to build on the comments of my colleagues Mr. DeCourcey and Ms. Kwan.

First, with regard to the standing order that Mr. DeCourcey mentioned, we have only an hour to examine this and this is a fairly weighty policy matter. I've conducted hundreds of job interviews in my life, and one of the exercises I often use to determine the competency of someone who, frankly, has been on the job for two months already is to ask, "Do you have a plan? What would you do in this situation? What are you going to do with it?"

Given that there are close to $1 billion of expenses now associated with the crisis at Roxham Road and the IRB backlog, I don't agree with the assertion that this is confidential information, and if it is, which is ridiculous, it should be tabled with this committee. I want that information.

Mr. DeCourcey, I don't agree with you. Frankly, I think it's spin to try to not have information in front of this committee in terms of real change.

To my colleague Ms. Kwan, I agree that we should move on with these things, but sometimes there is something that is worth fighting for. Why can't we have a document from the IRB that says what the plan is?

I'm sure Mr. Wex is quite competent. I'm sure he'd love the opportunity to table with the committee some assumptions around what the intake is going to be and the resource assumptions that are going to be required to reduce the inventory over a certain period of time. I don't understand why we as parliamentarians, especially going into a budgetary cycle, wouldn't want to look at that information.

Frankly, in terms of my Liberal colleagues voting this down, why would Parliament not want to examine this information? I'm sure Mr. Wex will provide something that is suitably sanitized, to allay the concerns of my colleagues opposite, a routine document that would be provided to this committee.

I would like to do that. I'm sure you guys will be able to crow about whatever you're trying to do in it. I don't think this is a frightening exercise by any means. The only reason to vote this down is that you have something to hide. Don't hide this; move on.

● (1600)

The Chair: Mr. DeCourcey and then Mr. Whalen.

Mr. Matt DeCourcey: If the member wants that information, there are ways it could potentially be sought. This committee is undertaking a study on migration patterns in the 21st century, but today we're here pursuant to the standing orders written in parliamentary procedure. I would think my colleagues would not want to circumvent those standing orders, nor parliamentary procedure, for the sake of getting what they want today.

There are ways to do this. I was merely referencing the reason this committee was brought together today for this testimony.

The Chair: Mr. Whalen.

Mr. Nick Whalen: If Ms. Rempel is okay with inviting the witness back once the document is prepared, we would entertain that.

The Chair: Are you suggesting an amendment?

Mr. Nick Whalen: Yes. I suggest, not to try to belabour it, that if it's a friendly amendment to invite Mr. Wex back, once this document is prepared, to discuss the IRB's plan to achieve a reduction and elimination of the backlog, I'd be happy to schedule another meeting on that.

The Chair: I'm not as good on either friendly or unfriendly amendments. If you would like to make an amendment, I would entertain an amendment to the motion.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Yes.

The Chair: So you're amending the motion to have such an opportunity to discuss the plan at a future date by inviting the chairperson back.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Yes.

The Chair: That is an amendment. We would like to discuss the amendment.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Given that Mr. Wex has suggested that they would be in a position to have this done within a two-month period, I would request that the meeting happen before the Christmas recess, if my colleague is amenable to that.

Mr. Nick Whalen: If the document is prepared before Christmas, absolutely.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I would suggest that be a hard yes.

The Chair: Is this a subamendment?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes. I would suggest that this would happen before Christmas.

The Chair: Okay, so we have a subamendment that we need to debate first, but seeing no debate on it, we will vote on putting a time limit on that to before Christmas.

(Subamendment negatived)

The Chair: We are now on the amendment that we invite the witness back at an appropriate time to present such a plan.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: My colleagues in the Liberal Party just voted down an amendment to have the IRB chair come back to talk about his plan, even though he himself in testimony today said he would be in a position to have this done within a two-month period. I would just like to put on the record that the voting down of that particular amendment was likely done because they plan to never have him back on this.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Is that true?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I don't understand, first of all, why we can't just have a document tabled with this committee on fairly routine information, and why the Liberals would vote that down. I would just postulate, Mr. Chair, that is because they don't want to have that and they have something to hide, perhaps because they have a minister of nothing.

The Chair: Rest assured that if this committee passes a motion to invite a witness, that witness will be invited.

Ms. Kwan and then Mr. Whalen.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Chair, I would like to move a subamendment with respect to the timeline.

It seems to me that the government members are concerned that the document may not be tabled by Christmas. That being said, there's some anticipation that perhaps this work would be completed within two months' time.

Why don't we make the suggestion that upon the completion of the report, within the week, that Mr. Wex be invited back to this committee so that we can actually have that discussion? I think that's fair. It will be tabled; the government will have it, and then we as parliamentarians can actually look at it and move forward.

● (1605)

The Chair: Could I hear the amendment again?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: My subamendment would be to add in a timeline that, upon the tabling of the report from Mr. Wex to the government, within a week—

The Chair: —following the tabling—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —we invite him to come to the committee, and have a committee meeting on the issue.

The Chair: We have a second subamendment. Is there any discussion?

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I support the subamendment, but I would just like to put some information out for context.

It is so imperative that the IRB tell the government, parliamentarians and Canadians how they plan to address the backlog and the dramatically building inventory of cases within the IRB, and what advice they're presenting that they would like Parliament to undertake in that regard, especially if there are potential policy changes that might be required. We're at October 2. We have people staying in hotels in the greater Toronto area at taxpayer expense because the IRB has a case backlog.

This has a direct impact on budgetary expenditures related to the housing of people who have illegally entered the country and then subsequently claimed asylum. It has a direct impact on federal-provincial relationships with regard to the committee that's happening. It has a direct impact on whether or not we are in a position to evaluate any sort of supplementary estimates that might be presented to this committee.

I hope that anybody who is watching this realizes how ridiculous it is that we would be having any discussion about tabling a report on this, given the severity and gravity of this particular issue.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Ayoub.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): I believe that everyone around the table shares the same goal since every member of the committee wants this information. There is no doubt about that.

However, how we feel about how to obtain that information might differ. We are splitting hairs over when Mr. Wex will submit a document or a recommendation. I agree with Mr. DeCourcey: we met to confirm that Mr. Wex had the required skills for his position.

Before we were able to even finish asking the witness our questions about that — we didn't even get all the way around the table — we were already looking for information on the work he will do. I have no problem asking him for that information when we invite him back to the committee. I have no objection to inviting the witness back more than once even.

However, today we want to verify the witness' skills. Moving a motion before, after, or during the study of another document seeking to bring back the witness is a waste of time. Once we learn of the existence of a document, no matter what it is, or supplementary information, and we need to invite the witness back, then we will simply make that request.

That's what I wanted to say about the supplementary motion.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Rempel, do you have something to add?

[*English*]

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I asked a very simple question that I think Mr. Wex would have agreed to do. We had to move a motion to do this. I don't understand why the government is so reticent to provide information about how it's going to deal with a 65,000 inventory backlog.

Again, I strongly support the subamendment. I'll re-emphasize what that is. Once Mr. Wex provides a document to the government —and again, I don't understand why that doesn't exist right now; I would question competency to be perfectly honest. I don't understand how we don't have a plan to deal with this, given how many cases there are. I would argue that this should be able to be produced now, but if this can't be produced in a two-month period, how many more cases are we going to have?

The subamendment makes perfect sense. Everybody should vote for it and if they don't vote for it, again, I would postulate the motivation would be to hide a lack of a plan.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): I can't understand why anyone would be against this subamendment, as well, because it's referring to one week after it's tabled. Whether Mr. Wex has had time to put a new plan together or not, I don't think the issue. There should have been a plan when he was here before and it still should be available now, so we could ask for that plan as well, and another one in two weeks' time or two months' time.

I think it is appropriate to have him come back within a week of the tabling of such a plan.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you.

Seeing that there is no other debate, we're voting on a subamendment which requires the witness to table a report with the committee one week following its presentation to government.

(Subamendment negatived)

The Chair: We now come to the amendment to the motion, which is that the witness be invited to the committee to discuss his plan when it's available.

I'll just remind all members that I won't entertain people repeating their points.

Yes, Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I want to clarify that the amendment we're voting on now has no timeline for the presentation of a plan to the committee, so there is no firm obligation. I would suggest that's because there is no plan, as has been demonstrated by the government's inability to answer basic questions on this. I would suggest that government voting down these two subamendments, which put some timelines around this, suggests that again, there is no plan.

The Chair: Is there any other discussion on the amendment?

(Amendment agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Now, we are at the motion as amended.

The amended motion has some difficulty in it, without the amendment, frankly, because it's impossible to request a document not prepared. We are attempting to find it in the standing orders—I think it is there—that we can't request a document. However, as now amended, I think the motion does stand well, that the chairperson be invited to this committee to present his plan, following its presentation to the government.

(Motion as amended agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: We have about 18 minutes.

Ms. Rempel, you have three minutes left.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Mr. Wex, since I can't talk about any plans that you might have or address how your competency might be able to achieve that plan, perhaps we could go back to the scope of the problem and how you would address it.

One of the things that has come up with some of your predecessors in front of this committee is addressing some of the IRB's practices and the potential pull factors for people who might come into the asylum system and don't have valid asylum claims, and ways to reduce that.

Is it your understanding that perhaps the wait times that are being created for people who are claiming asylum in Canada, especially through Roxham Road, might create a potential pull factor for people coming into Canada? People know that they have at least two years before their asylum claim is heard. Therefore, they can come into the country, and that's creating a pull for people to enter the country this way.

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, I have heard of that, and I understand why some people would say that. I have not reviewed any documentation or any evidence to support it, but that's not to say that it doesn't exist. I know that's an idea that's out there. It has some sense of reason to it, but I can't say that I've seen or read anything that would empirically support it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You talked in your opening remarks about a desire to reach out to stakeholders to get a better understanding of some of the challenges. Would your consultation with stakeholders include doing some research on this particular phenomenon?

Mr. Richard Wex: I haven't considered that before, Mr. Chair. I have no objection to looking into that matter. I think it's an interesting question. I can undertake to consider that further in the context of my responsibilities.

Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of the Yeates report, there are two models for asylum determination being proposed. One of the models would see the the IRB fall under the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and this would mean that the IRB is no longer independent. Do you support this model?

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, thank you very much for that question.

I think that's a hypothetical question at this point in terms of a new agency. I understand the spirit in which it was made, to try to integrate a whole bunch of issues that are currently dispersed across three parties into one.

My own experience over the past number of years with machinery changes, which rest with the prerogative of the Prime Minister, of course, is that there are significant transaction costs associated with them, and they would need to be carefully considered prior to moving forward.

● (1615)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Wex. Welcome to your position. I look forward to working with you on this important matter, the role the IRB has to play with the immigration system, and, in particular, the integrity of our immigration system.

You mentioned that the inventory at the moment is at 65,000 cases. It would take about two years to sort of get that processed, given the current resources you have available to you. If we were to reduce that backlog to what I think the government likes to say is a standard with respect to processing delays, which is generally around 12 months, could you tell us how much money would be required by way of an injection into the IRB for that work to be done within a 12-month period, given the current number of applications that are in place?

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, thank you for the question.

Just to clarify, I indicated that 65,000 or so is the current backlog. It can't be reduced in two years. The previous member's question was how long it would be if we didn't receive any new claims from here on in.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, understood.

Mr. Richard Wex: If you're asking how much it would take to reduce the 65,000 to essentially a working inventory of one year's worth, which is about 30,000, then it would essentially be 35,000 claims over the context of one year. We could calculate that and provide the information to you.

I could hazard to guess at the moment, but I don't want to. However, it would not be difficult to calculate how much it would take to process or finalize 30,000 refugee claims.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If we could receive that information for the committee, I would appreciate it.

Mr. Richard Wex: Sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: As for the current rate of increase, could you tell the committee how many cases are coming in on average on a monthly basis?

Mr. Richard Wex: Yes, I can. The backlog is growing on average by about 2,400 claims per month. If you assume, in addition, that we have about 55,000 or so claims per year, you divide that by 12, and you'll get your average monthly claim intake.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With the 65,000 cases, are those all new applications or are they the previous backlog?

Mr. Richard Wex: That's right, Mr. Chair, they go back now some time and there's a combination of both claims that are coming in, irregular border crossers, and accumulated claims over the last number of years. With respect to the legacy claims that predated 2012, as you know, there were about 5,000 or so at the time. We're making very good progress on that front and we're on track. We're actually on schedule to complete all of the legacy claims prior to March 31, 2019.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could you provide to the committee a breakdown of the 65,000 cases in terms of what categories they fall under so we have that information specifically?

Mr. Richard Wex: Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Kwan. Mr. Chair, essentially about 40% or 45% of the backlog relates to irregular border crossers.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, thank you.

On the 5,000 cases of the legacy claims, and this is prior to your arrival, the government actually directed the IRB to deal with those cases. The problem, of course, was there were no resources provided to the IRB to do that. The IRB had to rob Peter to pay Paul. That meant they had to divert everything else that the IRB needed resources for and then put it into these legacy claims.

I'm glad that some work is being done there, but that doesn't really solve the problem. Robbing Peter to pay Paul does not solve the problem.

I want to turn to the Yeates report. I assume that you've read the Yeates report. I understand you're in the process of formulating some options for the government's and the minister's consideration. I wonder what your personal thoughts are at the moment about the Yeates report, particularly with respect to the proposal that we advance the refugee determination process under the discretion of the minister. That's an interview question.

● (1620)

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to clarify that money was provided. It's important for the committee to understand that money was provided in budget 2018 for the legacy files to help address that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand that, but prior to that, the government actually made the announcement of dealing with the legacy cases and no dollars were actually provided.

Mr. Richard Wex: Yes, that's right. I just wanted to make sure that I was forthright in terms of my understanding of budget 2018.

In terms of Mr. Yeates' recommendations, it was a very long report, with some 65 different recommendations, but for the purpose of the committee, I would say there were four main recommendations.

First—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm just going to stop you there. I'm going to ask one specific interview question. I would like your personal comments about the recommendation of putting the refugee determination process under the discretion of the minister.

Mr. Richard Wex: Again, as chair of the IRB, I'm not in a position to comment on a policy matter. That's properly with the government to consider.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This is within part of the recommendations in which you will provide options for the minister to consider on how you would manage the asylum claim applications for the IRB.

Mr. Richard Wex: I guess, Mr. Chair, I'd like to make a couple of points because it relates back to the earlier motion that was approved by this committee. I understand well the independence of the IRB, particularly with respect to the adjudicate responsibilities. I also understand well that, as an administrative tribunal, the tribunal is still part of the executive. The advice that I end up giving to the minister on this issue or any issue affecting the functioning of the board in my capacity as CEO of the board, if you will, is advice to the minister. That part will be privileged and confidential.

I'm happy to talk to you about views within my remit in terms of what I would do if I had certain monies approved by the government, but with respect to, number one, a policy choice that the government has or, number two, the nature of my advice to the minister, I think that would be inappropriate.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, then let me ask you this question. In an ideal universe, how much resources would you request of the government to deal with the current situation that you're faced with today to ensure that the IRB and the integrity of the system are kept intact?

Mr. Richard Wex: Again, Mr. Chair, it's a complicated question in the sense that it's not just how much resources would be ideal to bring down that significant backlog. I have to take into account the ramp-up capability of this organization. I have to take into account how many people we can recruit as a highly professional workforce, training, space. All these issues will inform the development of a financial budget ask.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you table it for the committee?

The Chair: I'm afraid that's the end of your time, Ms. Kwan.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Whalen, you're next.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for coming, Mr. Wex. It's a real privilege to have you here and to have an opportunity to ask you, as the new chair of the IRB, as if you hadn't really been hired, what your qualifications might be for this job.

If I can get to the point that Ms. Rempel and Ms. Kwan were getting at, maybe you could describe for us previous work experiences where you've had to manage a backlog, you've had to manage a situation in which there was an under-resourced or understaffed project or program, and in addition to having to solve the backlog, you also had to manage towards not creating additional costs of overcapacity.

I think that's really what we're worried about here. We want to make sure you're going to approach this in a responsible manner, but also in a manner which is empathetic to the plight of migrants.

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for the question.

I think I spoke to my overall background, in terms of my legal background, my extensive executive leadership background, coupled with my more recent immigration and border security background that gives me the necessary understanding of the operating context.

In terms of backlogs per se, I have had experience working with backlogs in a number of different areas of responsibility. When I left the Department of Justice to take on the job as the first director general of the aquaculture division at Fisheries and Oceans, it was to establish an office in Ottawa as well as the regional offices; none had previously existed.

Aquaculture was a policy priority for the government of the day. There were significant backlogs, in terms of licensees seeking to get licence in the various ocean spaces, competing with other users of the ocean space. Significant backlogs existed there.

The problem there was different than the problem here. The problem there was a question of understanding the rules of the game. There was a lack of clarity, and so files didn't get processed. My job at that point was to bring clarity to the rules of the game by clarifying a policy framework, introducing the first-ever policy framework, clarifying the regulatory framework, and developing programming for the industry that allowed us to invest appropriately and eventually manage that backlog down. That was the diagnostic then.

When I was the leader of the habitat management program, which at the time was Canada's largest environmental regulatory program, we also faced, as a regulatory body, significant backlogs. That program was responsible for managing projects in and around waterways, high-risk projects, such as oil sands and diamond mines, and low-risk projects, such as docks. Again, there was a significant backlog within that regulatory program. The issue there was also in part clarifying the rules of the game.

At Immigration, for example, we also had backlogs across different business lines, as this committee is very well aware. The issue there was different. It wasn't an issue of clarity of the rules of the game, but it was a question of level space—which I don't need to explain to this committee; you understand it well—and capacity, in terms of HR capacity to process the various applications.

I guess what I'm saying is, number one, I do have experience with backlogs. Unfortunately, they're not uncommon. Number two, the key is to diagnose the problem appropriately before jumping ahead and trying to solve it. In my experience, spending time on the proper diagnoses will result in an appropriate solution set to move forward with. I intend to do that with the IRB.

I would note one last thing, Mr. Chair. The IRB has faced backlogs before. It faced backlogs in 2002. It faced backlogs in 2009. In both of those circumstances, over its 30 years, it has successfully addressed those backlogs.

This is not new to the IRB. It is more significant than in previous examples. That said, backlogs at those times were fairly significant, and the IRB was able to, with the appropriate conditions for success, bring down those backlogs.

● (1625)

Mr. Nick Whalen: Thank you.

You were about to answer Ms. Kwan's question earlier when she realized she was running out of time.

I'll ask you again to provide your high-level thoughts on what your four main takeaways were from the Yeates report, just to give us a sense of how you view it.

However, you only have about a minute, because I have some administrative business to take care of with my last minute.

Mr. Richard Wex: Okay. Thank you.

Very quickly, the way I looked at it, despite it being a very long report with 65 recommendations, was that there were four significant buckets of recommendations.

Number one was to strengthen the management of the asylum determination system, but horizontally. I spoke to that earlier. It's very important for IRCC, IRB and CBSA to understand how the system functions as a whole from beginning to end and that we have common situational awareness of what is working well and what is not working so well, so that we can marshal our resources and our attention to those areas that actually require correction.

Number two, Mr. Yeates suggested that we explore machinery changes that would integrate some of the functions related to the asylum determination system into one separate new agency: some of the intake, first-level decision-making, pre-removal risk assessments, voluntary returns and, interestingly enough, some aspects related to international resettlement.

The third bucket that Mr. Yeates referred to is funding. We've talked about that and the significant need to secure funding for both the backlog and new intake, because the A-base the IRB has, our base funding, is at a certain level and the current intake is much higher than that.

Last is process improvements. Where can we find the noise in the system, the duplication and inefficiencies, and streamline it?

Those are the four buckets. In many of those areas, we're already advancing.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Thank you very much, Mr. Wex.

On that note, I would like to move, Mr. Chair, that the chair present a report to the House that the committee has examined the qualifications and competence of Richard Wex to the position of chairperson of the Immigration and Refugee Board and finds him competent to perform the duties of his position.

● (1630)

The Chair: That is indeed the customary motion for the end of our work.

Is there any discussion on the motion? I'm seeing none.

(Motion agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: We're going to suspend for a moment.

Mr. Wex, thank you for your time with us today. Thank you for your public service and for continuing in that public service at the IRB.

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We'll take a moment to suspend as we get ready for our second panel.

● (Pause) ●

● (1635)

The Chair: I'm going to call us back to order.

Mr. Saunders is getting set up, so we're going to begin with Ms. Bradley.

I'll remind the committee that we are continuing on in this new study on migration in the 21st century. In this study, we'll be bringing together thinkers, actors, doers, stakeholders and interested parties to help us as we prepare for a report on what is going on with respect to migration in the world and what Canada's response should be to it.

Ms. Bradley.

Ms. Megan Bradley (Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, McGill University, As an Individual): Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here.

I'm a professor at McGill University, where my work focuses on questions around refugees and forced migration. In this capacity, I very much appreciate the chance to share some reflections with you on how Canada can improve its performance and make a bigger difference in responding to displacement.

As we often hear, there are now more people forced from their homes than at any point since World War II. We tend to hear most about the very small minority who manage to make it to Europe or North America, but the vast majority of refugees, as I imagine you know, some 86%, remain in developing countries.

I am very happy to answer questions on refugees, but in the time I have, I'm going to focus on a group that we hear even less about, a group that I think should really be central in a conversation like this, and that is those who are displaced within the borders of their own countries. Internally displaced persons, or IDPs, make up the invisible majority of forced migrants worldwide. Because they remain within their own countries, they typically receive much less media attention and international support.

Improving international responses to internal displacement is, I'll argue, critical to effectively addressing the global refugee crisis, but this issue has been almost completely sidelined in the negotiation of the new global compacts on refugees and migration.

There are key, and as yet untapped, opportunities for Canada to improve its response to internal displacement. So I will address some of the key challenges facing IDPs and make some recommendations for moving forward.

Just by way of context, of the some 68.5 million people who are displaced worldwide by conflict and human rights violations, well over half, some 40 million, are displaced within their own countries. These are individuals who are in a situation that's often much like that of refugees in that they have lost their homes and livelihoods. Many have experienced extreme violence and have been separated from their families. But unlike refugees, they haven't crossed an international border.

As IDPs are citizens of the state in which they are displaced, in theory their own governments have primary responsibility for protecting and assisting them. But for many IDPs in countries like Syria and Myanmar, it's in fact their own government that is responsible for their predicament in the first place. In other cases, national and local governments lack the capacity to respond effectively.

In theory, this is where the international community would step in to help, but there is no high-level official or international agency with clear and reliable responsibility for protecting and assisting IDPs. The UNHCR has a mandate to protect and assist refugees and stateless persons, but its involvement with IDPs is much more scattergun. In international debates on the global displacement crisis, there has been no clear flag-bearer for IDPs, and consequently this is a population that has typically been pushed to the sidelines.

In fact, 2018 marks the 20th anniversary of the UN guiding principles on internal displacement. This is the international framework that is the touchstone in efforts to protect and assist IDPs, so I think this is an opportune time to take stock and identify how best to move forward.

Canada is a long-time supporter of the guiding principles, but our rhetorical support hasn't typically translated into an explicit and practical strategy for improving responses to IDPs. So, a strengthened Canadian strategy for addressing internal displacement should respond, I think, to three key challenges pertaining to resources, the resolution of displacement situations and international leadership.

First, in terms of resources, there is a need for increased but also more strategic and equitable deployment of resources in support of forced migrants. This is, of course, a time when humanitarian budgets are already stretched tight, and so it's hard to hear or argue that more funding is needed. However, the reality is that IDP situations are chronically underfunded, with dramatically lower amounts spent in support of IDPs compared to refugees facing similar situations.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva, donor states such as Canada spend far more on refugee status determination and refugee resettlement processes, which are accessed by less than 1% of refugees worldwide, than they do on support for the millions who remain in developing countries. This lack of support means that many forced migrants who would in fact prefer to remain closer to home have little option but to make dangerous and often very difficult journeys to seek shelter abroad.

Of course there is no substitute for refugees' right to seek asylum. Increasing support for IDPs certainly doesn't mean that refugees can be turned back. Rather, this is a matter of recognizing the complexity of motivations, capacities and preferences in massive displacement situations.

● (1640)

Some people will need to flee across international borders as refugees, but many simply lack the resources to be able to make it across an international border in the first place or are unable to do so for health or security reasons. Protection and assistance need to be available on a more equitable basis for those who remain within their own countries. I would argue that Canada should review its support for IDPs and publicly release the findings alongside a plan for more systematic, equitable and strategic support for IDPs.

Second, in terms of durable solutions, worldwide both refugees' and IDPs' situations are becoming increasingly protracted. These are individuals who are unable to access a solution to their displacement, whether through returning to their homes, locally integrating where they've sought shelter or resettling or relocating elsewhere.

Because IDPs are usually not as visible a population as refugees, there's been massive underinvestment in support of durable solutions for IDPs and neglect of the connections between the search for solutions for refugees and IDPs. In 2016, for example, some 6.5 million IDPs returned to their homes, many in fragile circumstances, in countries like Iraq, Syria and South Sudan. UNHCR in fact supported less than half of these returnees, which dramatically undercut their sustainability.

Too often we see that efforts to support solutions for refugees focus only on refugees themselves and ignore the connections between other groups involved in this process, like IDPs. This is an approach that's just divorced from reality. These groups aren't sealed off from one another, but they're connected by family ties, political dynamics and socio-economic concerns. Many refugees themselves risk becoming internally displaced when they return to their home countries, and this is another reason that we need to think more holistically about the connections between these groups.

More concerted political and development support is needed to increase access to durable solutions for both refugees and IDPs. I would argue that Canada should co-operate with key actors, including UNHCR, other donors and states that face internal displacement situations, to ensure that durable solution strategies are holistic and that they are appropriately resourced. Canada should insist that UNHCR explicitly address related internal displacement issues in its efforts to advance solutions for refugees.

Last, in terms of international leadership, as it stands in the UN system there's no high-level prominent flag-bearer for IDPs, who can hold states, UN agencies and other actors accountable for their efforts, or lack thereof, in support of IDPs. There's also a lack of states that are willing to stand up as champions for the IDP issue. At present, we have a special rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs. This is an important role, but it's a voluntary role and an unpaid one, and it lacks the influence and resources commensurate with the scale of the problem.

To address these concerns, Canada should make improved protection and assistance to IDPs an explicit priority in its interventions in the humanitarian system. As a key pillar in this strategy, Canada should push for the prompt appointment of a new special representative of the UN Secretary-General, with a specific mandate for IDPs. This official could advance co-operation and promote accountability towards IDPs at national and international levels, and Canada, I would argue, should ensure that this new office is appropriately resourced and review the mechanism to ensure that it is effective.

To conclude, Canada, through its support for refugee resettlement, has demonstrated, I think in a very concrete way, an ability to make effective and innovative contributions to protecting and assisting forced migrants. By more strategically and concertedly standing up in support of those who are displaced within their own countries, who often remain invisible, Canada can build on this track record and make a bigger, stronger contribution to strengthening responses to the millions of refugees and IDPs who will never manage to make it to the shores of a wealthy western state like Canada.

Thank you.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Saunders, thank you. We'll get a chance to ask a journalist/writer questions eventually. I'm looking forward to watching this.

Mr. Doug Saunders (Writer, International Affairs, The Globe and Mail, As an Individual): That's right. It'll all be deep background, of course.

Thank you, Chair.

I'm pleased to see that this committee is engaged in this important examination of migration studies and opportunities, and especially its focus on the causes of forced and voluntary migration, which is what I was invited to speak on.

I'm here to speak specifically about the challenge of irregular border crossings, drawing on my experience over the last 15 years in Europe. I believe the problem in Canada today, in this area, is similar in some important ways to the irregular-crossing problems that the European Union has faced on and off for the last 15 years. The scale is not at all similar, of course, but the migrant populations and their reasons for attempting irregular crossings are similar, and I'd argue that the solutions that have proven most successful in Europe have a lot of relevance to Canada.

As I said, I've had 15 years of experience examining this problem. Since 2003-04, I've interviewed migrants preparing to board boats and rafts in Tunisia, in Egypt and in Libya. I've spoken to them upon arrival in Spain, Greece, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and I've spent a lot of time with policy-makers, immigration officials and scholars working on these questions.

I'd like to address the following questions: What sort of people are likely to become irregular migrants? What causes people to choose irregular pathways and entry points despite the far greater risk and expense? What policies have been successful in ending or reducing irregular migration? I have five observations.

The first is that irregular migrants, whether claiming asylum or otherwise, tend to be people with resources and information who are making a high-risk investment with high stakes for their families and communities. They do not come from the poorest countries, and they don't come from the poorest communities in the countries that they come from. Irregular crossings are expensive, upwards of 2,000 euros per person to get on one of those rafts, and we have anecdotal evidence that Canada and U.S. crossings involve fairly large payments to smugglers and other agents. Many migrants have borrowed heavily to make the trip. At a minimum, they hope for a return on this investment. Understanding this can help shape policies of return and deterrence.

Irregular migrants have been informed through text messages and social media links that they have a good chance of supporting their families and returning that investment. Sometimes this information is accurate economic and labour market information. Migrants tend to go to the places that have labour shortages. They tend to avoid the countries with weak economies. Sometimes it's mythological. Sometimes it speaks to weaknesses in the system. The idea that was discussed earlier in this meeting, that known delay times in processing can be drivers of demand, seems to have a lot of basis in the information that drives migrants themselves. Certainly, anecdotally, I've heard that, and there's scholarship to support it.

Second, people generally choose irregular migration because legal, generally short-term pathways have been closed. The entire European migration crisis began in the early 2000s, because the EU, after the Schengen agreement, eliminated short-term agricultural labour visas for Africans. Suddenly, a legal, temporary migration regime was transformed into an illegal, long-term smuggling industry to replace that demand. Rather than paying $150 for an airplane ticket and having to repay that through one season of work, people were paying 2,000 or 3,000 euros for a crossing and having to stay longer to repay that. That industry took on a life of its own. One recent data analysis by scholars from Oxford University found that every 10% increase in short-stay visa rejection leads to a 4% to 7% increase in irregular border entries. There's a direct link between tightening temporary entry and the increase in demand for irregular crossings.

Third, increasing border security does not reduce irregular entry, and in some cases it increases it. This effect has been observed repeatedly in Europe and the United States. Now, there may be reasons to increase border security, but reducing irregular crossings is almost never a result of doing that, by any significant degree. According to Oxford University scholar Hein de Haas, border restrictions tend to interrupt circulation and push migrants into permanent settlement, often into more irregular routes, further criminalizing the process.

● (1650)

Fourth, creating legal pathways, even very limited and restricted ones, has been shown to reduce irregular entry, often dramatically. The most studied example of that was Spain after its crisis of 2004 to 2006, when there were many tens of thousands of people crossing the Mediterranean into Spain. It introduced a set of policies that reduced those numbers to very little at all. Chief among them was a legal pathway. Not great in number, but along with co-operation with both sending countries, intermediary countries and normalization programs.

It was found that people wishing to migrate, even if they thought there was a one in 20 chance of making it through a legal process, if that legal process existed, that one in 20 chance was better than spending 3,000 euros, and having a high chance of dying across the Mediterranean. Spain remains not a major destination partly because of this set of policies. It's worth examining. It's worth noting that the global compact on refugees also contains language to create shifting irregular claimants into legal pathways.

Fifth, speeding up the process can reduce demand, not just determination and appeal systems. As we discussed, one of the things that migrants discuss in these text messages and so on is the fact that if a country is known to take three years to complete a refugee determination system, then an appeal, that could be enough time to make enough of a living to repay your investment and so on. That is known.

The return system is also important to consider. Paying unqualified irregular entrants to return to their home country is something that European countries have begun to embrace. It seems to go against intuition. It's seems to be politically risky. In the Canadian example, an irregular entrant who has applied for asylum, has been rejected, has appealed and lost the appeal, and has gone through the whole process is eventually handcuffed to an RCMP officer on an airplane. You may have spent $100,000 on that person. Giving them $3,000 or something and an agreement with the sending country to receive them, assuming that you don't place them in greater danger, can be much quicker. Germany has had some reasonable success with those return programs since the 2015-16 crisis. It's worth examining those.

In summary, we need to realize that irregular migration is a market decision made by the people making the crossing. There are legitimate refugees in the mix. The number in Europe seems to have been 40% to 50% during the peak of its crisis. It seems to be the proportion in Canada as well.

It's unfair to the legitimate refugees to have a system that forces them to make irregular crossings. That places them in physical danger and puts a strain on the system. Of course, it's dangerous for the public support of the system. As well, it drives up demand among people who are not legitimate refugees who may not know about legal pathways that exist, who may try to take advantage of legal pathways if they do exist, and who may be legitimate economic immigrants otherwise.

The overwhelming lesson from the 15 years of European experience is that it is possible to reduce irregular volumes by creating legal pathways, and changing the market incentives for migration.

Thank you, Chair, and I welcome questions.

The Chair: I actually want more from both of you. It's always interesting from my perspective. I get to watch the committee members listening to witnesses. They actually listened to both of you. That's quite a treat for me.

Now we begin the hard part.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ayoub, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1655)

I thank the witnesses for being here.

Both parts of your testimony were very interesting and we might ask you to come back to our committee, but I will try to make the best possible use of the seven minutes that I have.

Mr. Saunders, you just said that there is a significant economic impact that ends up having an influence on a country's policies and the way it manages legal and illegal migration, or irregular migration if that's what you want to call it.

We can certainly look at what's happening in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, but I'm more interested in what's happening in Canada. It seems like Canada chooses its immigrants, although that appears to be less the case lately. Canada is bordered by three oceans and one large country, the United States. There have been recent changes to immigration policy. There is irregular migration. In any case, it does not seem to be regular at this time.

According to the articles you cited, we should be accepting even more. Without rehashing the whole thing, this started in 2017. What is being done to manage this migration? What can the government learn from past experience? You gave the example of Spain. That's fine, but I get the impression that when a measure is taken, it is followed by a counter measure and everything is always in flux. People adapt and that's normal.

What would you suggest? What advice would you give to the Canadian government?

[*English*]

Mr. Doug Saunders: That's the key question here.

We need to understand that the irregular crossing problem in Canada, between official crossing points in the Canada-U.S. border, much like the European-Mediterranean problems, is not some floodgate that's opened up that's going to overwhelm the system. It may feel like that now because the volumes in 2017 were high. We had not really seen it before, and it is alarming to Canadians.

We need to recognize that policies work. The European-Mediterranean crisis, which became most famous during its sudden spike in 2015 and 2016, has not been a continuous problem. As I said, it began around 2003 and 2004, when certain visas became unavailable and the market was created. Then it stopped after about 2006 for a number of years, because policies working with sending and intermediary countries had succeeded in stopping the flow and then shifting the demand to more regular and legal pathways.

It picked up again around 2011 during the Arab Spring uprisings, when those agreements fell apart because the governments they'd negotiated with were in some cases being overthrown and there was a bit of a spike. Then it went back down to negligible levels.

Suddenly, in 2015 and 2016, during the Syrian war but also as a consequence of other things on the other side of the Mediterranean, there was a very large spike. Again in 2017 it was down, and now it's back down to regular levels.

It's still a level of movement we find unsustainable in Canada, but we need to recognize that there is a policy record of successfully reducing movement by creating different incentives, by negotiating with sending countries and so on. This is not something that countries can't deal with, compensate for or control.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: You said that was done. So those policies worked.

Let's come back to Canada. Historically, it has been our policy to welcome people in the right way. We know that Canada is a country of immigrants and we want to welcome immigrants in the right way.

What is the current immigration situation? What should we change?

Ms. Bradley, you can answer that as well.

What are the biggest changes to be made to ensure that we comply with our UN agreements, those related to refugees and on the humanitarian side of things? Canada is a developed country. We want it to stay that way and to show some humanity. What can we do to reconcile that with keeping the economy sustainable?

● (1700)

[*English*]

Mr. Doug Saunders: I'll let Dr. Bradley respond first and see if I have something to add.

Ms. Megan Bradley: Thank you very much for the question.

In a broad conversation like this we need to be aware of the way in which we can implicitly assume that the goal should be to reduce the number of people who arrive. I would argue that the goal should be to make sure that people who need protection as refugees can access that protection in a safe and reliable way without needing to put themselves and their families at risk. Of course, we have a shared interest in regularity in arrivals and in making sure that the process is well managed, but so often we slip into this kind of thinking where low numbers mean we're doing our jobs right. When we look more broadly at what's going on in the world, I think we need to be suspicious about that kind of thinking. Instead, we need to look at the kind of factors that are driving people to come and make sure that we can give their claims the consideration that they merit.

If we think about the IRB determinations of the claims of people who have been entering irregularly from the United States, of course a significant number have been recognized as refugees. I think this attests to the system working well in some ways, in that people have the opportunity to make a claim, to be heard and to be granted protection as refugees in Canada.

I would just echo Doug's comment that we are not in a crisis situation in Canada, nor are we in a crisis situation in Europe. These are countries that are well equipped to deal with arrivals on the scale that we're experiencing lately. It's important to look at what's going on in countries like Lebanon, for example, where one in four people right now is a Syrian refugee. It's important to recognize that is a whole different scale and take the conversation in that direction so we can think about how we can support countries on the front lines that are really struggling.

Mr. Doug Saunders: Let me elaborate.

I think the concern of the Canadian public is not the numbers of people. It's the way they enter, and secondarily, the extent to which the system processes them slowly. I think if the same number of asylum claimants were presenting themselves at an official crossing or at an airport or something, and if the IRB and CBSA systems were working more quickly and efficiently, there would be no controversy to this. It would be part of the background noise of varying opinions about immigration, which are generally supportive.

The fact that people are forced, through a circumstance or through what they see as circumstance, to present themselves at crossing points between official crossings is something that the Canadian public does not endure. There's a long history that the Canadian public is quite tolerant of our UN obligations on asylum, regardless of the numbers year to year, within reason. However, whenever there's an irregular entry, whenever a boat shows up in British Columbia or whenever people walk across the border in more than negligible numbers, it becomes a political crisis that hurts support for the system. Rather than trying to reassure people on that, I think there are ways to shift that to more regular processes and to quicker processes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson.

Mr. David Tilson: Most of your presentation, Mr. Saunders, was spent on Europe. I had an opportunity to go to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg a number of times and there's no question that topic of migration is always there. People would ask us...and Canada, as my friend over here said, we have oceans. Well, now we're having a problem. It's true that we had problems with boats coming to the Pacific coast before that, but now we're having the immediate problems coming across.... You used the word "irregular" and I use the word "illegal". We won't get into that. Now we're having a whole bunch of people coming across the Quebec border, which would then disperse to Quebec, Montreal, and Toronto. It's been clear that much of the congestion at the IRB is because of these illegal entries.

We haven't heard any comment from the government or the IRB as to how that congestion can be solved. I'm sure you've had an opportunity to philosophize on that. One way is spending money. Have you any other ideas or recommendations as to how that two-year wait period can be relieved?

● (1705)

Mr. Doug Saunders: Thank you for that question. I think your colleague, Ms. Rempel, actually raised the key to this problem in the first half of this meeting, in that the delay times and the understaffing of the IRB drive the demand for these irregular crossings. I addressed earlier the problem of irregular crossings. There should be no need for irregular crossings. We should create legal pathways. There would not be public outrage if people were presenting themselves at legal crossings.

Yet we know, from work in Europe and from anecdotal evidence in Canada, that one of the factors that attracts people to present themselves for asylum, even if they are part of the 50% who are not legitimate asylum cases, is the knowledge that, due to understaffing, there's enough time to earn back their investment in this return. We know from the experience of other countries that staffing up our authorities enough to reduce the delay times—because the backlog is entirely due, as far as I can tell, to understaffing—would reduce the demand.

That would lead me to suggest that if this was approached as an emergency issue, it could be approached as a temporary emergency issue. If we could have a sudden five-year period of massive restaffing of these administrations, it might not be necessary in the future to have them staffed at that level. The emergency restaffing would reduce delay times enough to push the demand back down, if I can put it so crudely.

Rather than look at this as an incremental systemic change to institutions, maybe it should be approached as a one-time crisis measure.

Mr. David Tilson: It's not going to stop.

Mr. Doug Saunders: No, absolutely it's going to stop. This is a temporary instance. One thing we know about—

Mr. David Tilson: It's not going to stop. This problem of the illegal border crossings, it's going to continue.

Mr. Doug Saunders: Every experience of every country on this is that it won't.

Mr. David Tilson: Well, what do you mean? It's still going on in Europe and that's for the last 15 years.

Mr. Doug Saunders: No, as I said, Europe had a problem with Mediterranean crossings, from 2004 to 2006. Then it basically disappeared for a number of years because European countries made policy choices that shifted that movement from irregular to regular channels. Then it re-emerged in 2011 and thereabouts, during the Arab Spring years, because the agreements with the sending countries had fallen apart. Then it diminished again, only to reappear as a spike in 2015-16.

It has now fallen to regular levels and hopefully will fall to negligible levels again. Refugee crises are periodic. They are not constant. There's not a constant supply. We had big refugee crises in the 1980s caused by the Lebanon war, and in the 1990s by the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Somalia. We have them now, caused by the Syrian war. There are fewer countries at war right now than at any other time in human history. There are fewer drivers of asylum seekers. So we have a problem right now.

Mr. David Tilson: Dr. Bradley, I have a question for you, which you touched on.

Canada's ability to help those people in distress is well known. We're well regarded for that and I think it's something we should be proud of. However, we can't help everyone. We don't have the resources to help everyone, nor does anyone else, really.

I think you've already touched on my question: How should we prioritize people in distress who want to come here?

● (1710)

Ms. Megan Bradley: Do you mean people who want to enter Canada?

Mr. David Tilson: Yes. What policies should Canada have to prioritize people coming to this country?

Ms. Megan Bradley: We have clear legal commitments, and as a matter of first priority, we need to understand what those commitments are and stand by them. From that perspective, I think it's important to recognize that seeking asylum is not illegal. People do cross irregularly but there's a significant difference—

Mr. David Tilson: No, I don't want to get into that. I'm asking the question. There are people all over the planet who are having very serious problems, millions of them, and we want to continue helping people, within our means. Obviously we can't help everyone, nor can anyone else. So how should we prioritize all these different areas around the planet?

Ms. Megan Bradley: I would argue that we should be thinking about areas where people do want to stay closer to home and making it viable for them to do so. This is really central to thinking about the issue of internal displacement and also support for refugees within regions of origin.

We sometimes want to talk about these populations in a way that separates them out from one another. We need to think more holistically and recognize that if strategic support, for example, is provided to people who are looking to return to their communities, which is going on right now in Iraq and Syria.... They have little to no support from the international community. It's seen as a high-risk investment because the region is still unstable. That is going to be a never-ending cycle unless we provide some support, take some risks to make it possible for people to go back and rebuild their homes, restart their businesses.

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to end it there, Mr. Tilson.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I thank both of our witnesses today for their presentations.

I'm particularly interested in your comments about finding a way in which we can better manage the situation. I agree that it is not a crisis, and what is necessary is for us to properly manage it. Right now, as Mr. Saunders has indicated, where Canadians take offence is with the idea that somehow people are—quote, unquote—"jumping the queue".

In order to address this issue effectively, some, including me, have called for the suspension of the safe third country agreement, because that agreement forces people to enter Canada irregularly. Therefore, it creates this situation that we now face. People much smarter than me have called for this as well, particularly those in the legal profession and human rights activists.

My question for both of you is whether you think part of the management of the situation today would be for the government to suspend the safe third country agreement, exercising our authority to do so, to give notice, which we can suspend for 90 days.

Ms. Bradley, I'll go to you first.

Ms. Megan Bradley: Thank you.

I would agree with you that the safe third country agreement is not appropriate in the current context, particularly because of the dramatically different ways in which Canada and the United States assess the same refugee claims at the present moment.

What we've seen in the United States is an increasing politicization of the refugee status determination process, which is something we've really tried to avoid in Canada. Given that reality in the United States, I think it's incumbent on Canada to assess these claims fairly, and that's a matter of doing it independently now. I don't think we can count on a fair determination from the U.S., and for that reason, I would agree with you that the safe third country agreement should be suspended.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Doug Saunders: The safe third country agreement is what is causing irregular crossings between entry points on the Canada-U.S. border. There is no other factor. If people could present themselves at a legal crossing point for an asylum claim, they would do so. As I've said before, people are not crossing at irregular points because it's an easy way into Canada; they're crossing in the hardest and most expensive way into Canada because it's the only way under the safe third country.

I think there's a belief in government that it would be dangerous to suspend the safe third country agreement, not just because it involves suspending an agreement with the United States at a moment when we're trying to get some agreements with the United States, but because there's a fear that it would cause an increase in numbers, that if you suddenly eliminated it, you would have a rush to the border and numbers would increase.

I would suggest that in the medium term, that may not be the case, because of what I was speaking about earlier, the market demand for migration pathways. Doing so would shift an irregular crossing that is a gamble but is known and relies upon the delays in the system to allow people to stay in Canada for a long time into a legal pathway with known probabilities of acceptance and so on. The fact is that a lot of this crisis, aside from being caused by these policies, is caused by a lack of information among the migrants and putative migrants themselves.

Some correct information, some mythology that circulates among them.... There has been a track record, including in Canada, that making information about legal pathways known can reduce demand for illegal pathways.

I should say that some of the reduction in demand for irregular crossings among some populations.... Haitians were highly dominant in the first year of this problem, and now they've been reduced to something like 5% of the numbers. I think that's partly because the information has been circulated among those communities that there are legal pathways that are less risky and expensive that they can take.

This leads me to suggest that suspending the safe third country agreement would not necessarily cause a rush to the border, and in fact, it could be part of a managed solution that could reduce the numbers.

● (1715)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much for that answer.

I think it's particularly important to note, as well, that under article 10 of the safe third country agreement, Canada can in fact give notice that we want to suspend the agreement for 90 days. If we are worried about the big rush of suddenly a million people showing up at our borders, we can see how that works and how well we can manage it.

The government is thinking they can solve the entire issue by going out there, flying to the United States and telling people, "Don't come anymore, because you're really not welcome, even though we say you are." It won't manage the situation in and of itself. You need a host of approaches to it.

Keep in mind that Canada has an obligation under the UN convention—unless you want to shut down the borders, as our Conservative colleagues are suggesting—to apply the safe third country agreement to the entire border in Canada. If you don't want to go down that route, I think it's incumbent on us to try that, so thank you very much for that answer.

The situation we have where everybody comes through one point or a couple of points of entry creates challenges for the border communities. By allowing different points of entry across different parts of the border, wouldn't that also mitigate the challenges that the border communities face today, where everybody is centred around Roxham Road, for example?

Mr. Doug Saunders: Potentially. It would reduce a load on the policing system, on the immigration and refugee systems. Certainly dispersing these obligations across a number of border crossing points....

I mean, it's not just Roxham Road. It's—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It's Manitoba, as well.

Mr. Doug Saunders: It's Manitoba as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There are some in British Columbia.

Mr. Doug Saunders: The other day, I met a young, 17-year-old Syrian man who said he walked across in British Columbia. Now he's been admitted to an exclusive private school and that sort of thing.

It's a big load to have to police the border in that way. I mean, everybody gets arrested when they cross.

I'm pretty sure the RCMP would tell you they'd rather not try to be immigration processors along the entire length of the border. It's a waste of resources.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

In fact, British Columbia has higher numbers. It's the second highest in terms of irregular border crossings.

That said—

The Chair: I'm afraid that's your time.

Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): I want to thank both of you.

It's refreshing, especially for the study on migration, that you both get it. One of the things we wanted to see was the best practices in other jurisdictions. Both of you have touted those and seen those, specifically in Europe, as Mr. Saunders said.

When I'm listening to you, I hear that easier short-term visa access reduces claims. I've seen that specifically in the South Asian community. Visas have increased, and their asylum claims have decreased. If they see a labour market impact assessment that fits the employment they have, they're able to go into that. They definitely don't seek another pathway when they have a legal pathway. I've seen the very positive effect of that, and a reduction in asylum claims.

As Mr. Saunders said, I think having several members of Parliament go to speak to the Haitian communities in New York and Miami has helped to reduce that Haitian migration pattern. That was about clarifying information. We've seen that it works.

The only ingredient I see lacking, from what I've heard from you, is perhaps the efficiency on processing refugee claims. I think we're still slower at that. We need to do better, so people get the correct information.

Which jurisdictions in Europe have you seen that have done it better, in terms of having a fair process in refugee claims but also doing it efficiently?

Dr. Bradley, if you could answer that first, and then Mr. Saunders next.

● (1720)

Ms. Megan Bradley: I hate to break it to you, but I'm not sure there are countries that are doing it better. There are huge problems with how this kind of work is done in Europe.

To be honest, I wouldn't want us looking eastward for insight on that. Globally speaking, I think Canada is actually doing well on this issue. There are opportunities to improve, but I think we need to resist the temptation to think there are some other countries somewhere else that are doing this better.

I think we need to look inwards and reflect that way.

Mr. Doug Saunders: If we're just talking about the asylum and refugee system, and not about the issue of dealing with irregular border crossers, I think most European countries are looking to Canada.

There are specific pieces that are worth looking at in European countries. It's worth looking at the German experiments with return programs during the last two years. It's also worth looking at their massive investment in apprenticeship programs and housing, which have created a very successful integration process for those 40% or so of the migrants who were accepted as refugees.

The Canadian system generally works very well under its normal systems, if you discount the speed the determination process takes. A reliance on sponsorship and government-assisted resettlement refugees makes it a fairly secure system. Particularly our process of effectively turning accepted refugees into regular immigrants quickly, and then into permanent residents and citizens quickly, reduces a lot of the danger to the system that European countries have experienced where people remain refugees for life.

I would say that we need to look abroad for specific pieces, and we need to look abroad for lessons on how to reduce irregular crossings, but that's in order that our refugee system can go back to being what it should be, which is a small slice of our immigration picture.

We do not want a situation where our immigration system is depending on refugee pathways as one of its main channels. It should be 5% to 10% of our immigration picture. That's what the entire system was designed to handle and that should be the normal rate. We should not be in a situation like some European countries where we're relying on asylum as our main source of immigration. It's not a good way to run an immigration system and it's unfair to the various migrant parties as well.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Mr. Saunders, you also talked about looking into the economic factors on how refugees or migrants decide where to go, which is very interesting: the cost of going, the payback time, the delay in processing and whatnot.

Currently in the irregular migrant crossings the biggest group is coming from northern Africa, if I understand correctly, and from one particular area. They're getting American visas rather quickly and then they're migrating across. We have been effective on disseminating information to the Latin American communities and the Haitian communities in the U.S.

What do you think is the best way to communicate with those communities? Are there certain social media channels that are better ways, or should our embassies there convey that message so that these people aren't duped into spending a fortune to come here and then not being able to stay if, in fact, they're not refugees? They would be economic migrants and would be returned after they have undertaken a large debt load. Are there effective means that you think can be used?

Mr. Doug Saunders: Nigeria has been the largest source country for irregular crossings in Canada. In fact, it was the largest source country for irregular crossings into Italy last year as well.

A certain portion of Nigerians are legitimate refugees. There are situations in Nigeria that would qualify under the United Nations convention. My understanding is that about 40% of Nigerian applicants in Canada are deemed to be convention refugees.

That said, for those who are legitimate refugees, that's no way to be entering Canada, to have to pay a fortune to go into the United States and then pay another fortune to go into Canada, and it should be deterred. There are a lot of people who have been misled through their information networks about using the asylum process as a way to enter Canada as labour migrants.

I think, as you suggested, we need to change the myths and the information, but frankly, we also need to change the physical reality that actually for some people entering through the asylum system as a way to earn some money during the determination process, and so on, it has been successful. As I said, I think dealing with the understaffing of the determination system, of the appeal courts and so on, so that it's not just quicker, but it is seen to be quicker—

● (1725)

The Chair: I need to end it there. Thanks, Mr. Saunders.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With the brief time we have remaining, you'll probably have 30 seconds to comment on two potential changes. I'd like the debate to be around policy going forward.

I think that what we need to do in Canada, in terms of a path to entry for people who are trying to come into Canada through the asylum system but don't have a valid asylum claim, is to completely reform the temporary foreign worker program. I think it's pejorative in its title. I think it leads to abuse of workers, and I don't think it adequately meets the needs of the labour force in the Canadian economy.

What I'm proposing is that we reform it such that low-skilled migrants who might think about entering Canada as asylum seekers have a more formal way to come to Canada. Let's say, you work three out of four years. If you stay employed for that period of time in Canada, put in place a mechanism that is cognisant of labour mobility rules. You're eligible for citizenship. Then encourage people to come that way, and stop the whole, frankly, ridiculous, unsustainable system of the seasonal agricultural worker program, the caregiver program. I think it's unfair. That's proposal number one.

Proposal number two is, I would like to see reform in how we select humanitarian immigrants so that there is more of a focus and a nimbleness in our government on being able to help internally displaced persons, especially marginalized communities. The two ways I would propose to do that is for the Government of Canada to push the UN for reform on their determination process to ensure that people who can't reach UN refugee camps still have access into that selection process. That's going to take some work and an acknowledgement of a problem. Also, I propose that the Government of Canada reserve the government-sponsored refugee spots with more of a focus on, let's say, an instance of the four atrocity crimes. We put some nimbleness into that selection like we did with the Yazidi refugee program and we subsequently start to lift the caps on the privately sponsored refugee programs so that we unleash the ability of the Canadian public to sponsor refugees.

With the time remaining, I'd like you to comment on those ideas.

Ms. Megan Bradley: I think those ideas are very promising.

I would agree with you that it's concerning for many refugees who are coming to Canada through the resettlement system. It's in fact a kind of family reunification. I think we can channel those movements towards family reunification and, as you say, maximize opportunities to try to make sure that people who, for example, cannot escape their own country may still be able to access resettlement opportunities and other forms of protection.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Saunders, please comment with the brief time remaining.

Mr. Doug Saunders: I think a unified, single temporary visa that's agnostic as to the type of work, as you suggest, and that contains a clear pathway to permanent residency and citizenship for those who want it would be fine, with the qualification that it needs to be clear that it keeps families intact, that it allows family reunification during the temporary work process, which is another flaw in the current system that could be addressed.

I think it's a danger to countries to have unaccompanied men in large numbers residing in the country for a long time, and frankly, also unaccompanied women whose families are elsewhere. It's generally not good to have policies that keep families apart. In the history of Canadian—

● (1730)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sorry, but I have such little time.

Can you each give us perhaps two or three names of those who you think we should be talking to to explore the actual implementation mechanisms of that particular scope of policy? If you can't today, I would invite you to perhaps write to the chair as well if you have any further thoughts.

I'll just close by saying that I don't think the system is working. I think we need to change our processes holistically in order to have the asylum system focused on the world's most vulnerable and then have a path to entry for people that is closely mapped with the needs of the Canadian economy. I just feel that there's a bit of a gap.

I don't know if we have any more time for comments, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We don't really, but we'd be happy if you would like to send us something. Also, the study is going to go on for a little bit, and we may get back to you.

Don't hesitate to be in touch with me or the clerk and we can figure out ways to get further input from you.

Thank you.

Mr. Doug Saunders: I would be happy to submit a set of references and notes.

Ms. Megan Bradley: Certainly, yes.

The Chair: Very good.

As the member for Thorncliffe Park, I thank you for your work.

The meeting is adjourned.

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